**[Land of no joy](https://www.dawn.com/news/1693230/land-of-no-joy)**

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June 5, 2022

The writer teaches journalism.

IN dark times, news that Pakistani film Joyland received the Jury Prize at Cannes last week warmed the heart. I hope audiences will get the chance to watch it in cinemas here especially after reading such rave reviews of it. In related news, there’s a palpable excitement surrounding Sarmad Khoosat’s Kamli as well. And of course, there’s the new Ms Marvel with a Pakistani female superhero that looks like fun.

Despite all the innovation in streaming platforms and fancy movie theatre-like TV screens, it’s hard to beat the joy of going to a cinema.

I probably got this love of the cinema from my parents, who as new migrants in the Persian Gulf took me, then a toddler, to movies with them, because childcare options were limited. Apparently I’d run around the cinema and no one seemed too disturbed by me.

As my sisters and I grew older, we became VHS-watching expat kids, obsessed with Bollywood, Pakistani dramas, and went to the cinema on our travels. In Pakistan, we didn’t see ourselves in the movies and the cinemas were decrepit.

In neighbouring India, Bollywood films for the NRIs became a game changer, as did multiplex cinemas. My Nigerian friends tell similar stories about Nollywood’s success; today, its cinema accounts for 2.3 per cent of the country’s GDP according to PwC.

If no one wants to watch a film, maybe the film is the problem.

While the advent of multiplexes in Pakistan made cinema accessible to more (read rich) people, attempts to ban, curtail the screening of foreign films has been frustrating. That it is usually done to prop up local cinema is grating because often films made here are doozies. There are of course exceptions to this but few and far between.

Successive governments say they want to revive the film industry but release ill-thought-out policies by folks who have nothing to do with film. The most recent attempt was in September 2020 when SAPM retired Lt Gen Asim Bajwa presented a paper on the subject and said the government wanted to increase films being made, establish a fund for monetary support to filmmakers and artists, offer rebates, incentives and tax breaks — all for the promotion of culture and national heritage. Patriotism sells but it is now stifling. The threat of being labelled a traitor is resulting in strange calls to action.

The Sindh High Court last month told cinemas they must screen 85 per cent of Pakistani movies and the rest foreign — presumably to boost local cinema. This is after filmmakers complained four of the films released over Eid did not get a fair shot because cinemas screened the Hollywood blockbuster Dr Strange 2.

Is there any part of peoples’ lives that isn’t being policed?

Why should cinema owners and audiences be responsible for propping up a film industry that somehow refuses to understand and respond to audience needs? Is it wise to release all four films simultaneously knowing that a big event film will be released that same weekend? This only shows that many in Pakistan’s film industry have not yet understood how to make movies or how people watch them.

Let filmmakers tell the stories they want but let people choose to watch them, too. If no one wants to watch your film, maybe your film is the problem.

The government can take a lesson from Nigeria’s Economic Recovery and Growth plan in which they identified cinema as a priority sector. The result of that labour can be evidenced by the fact that it is the second largest film industry in the world in terms of output. In 2016, IMF said cinema was the second source of jobs after agriculture with a million people employed in it, directly or indirectly. Their business models are well defined, their production quality is top notch and their content is sought after by Netflix and Disney Plus.

A Unesco rep­ort in October 2021 said that film industries across Africa could quadruple their revenue to $20 billion and create 20m additional jobs in creative industries. The report also noted that countries were adopting diverse models to grow their film industries but “were struggling to attain sustainable growth”.

But there was much to be hopeful about. Unesco cited Mauritius and Cape Verde for making “big jumps” thanks to private sector sup­port and banks that offered credit for films.

Many African countries can provide lessons because they have made jumps without government support. International television groups invested in local content in Ivory Coast and Senegal. The pandemic provided a boost for filmmakers in Kenya, Rwanda, Ethiopia and Senegal to move to digital platforms where “they can now live off the income generated online” said Unesco.

Pakistan’s spread of digital technology can prove to be a growth driver for its entertainment industry. With growth in internet access and smartphone use, one can expect an increase in demand for programming. But everyone needs to accept that audience expectations have changed and they expect better. I can’t wait to see what that better looks like on the big screen.

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*Published in Dawn, June 5th, 2022*